

Opposition: An Opportunity to Witness for Christ



Thrust Statement: One's spiritual opposition is his spiritual opportunity to advance the cause of Christ.

Scripture Reading: [John 11:9](#); [1 Corinthians 16:8-9](#); [2 Timothy 4:1-5](#)

As one faces opposition—verbal abuse or physical abuse—one must not lose heart and forsake Christ ([Hebrews 12:1-3](#)). Unfriendliness, as in the days of Christ and the apostles, is not a phenomenon that belongs only to the modern world. Even today, some Christians still practice opposition against other Christians, especially when it comes to preaching grace. But opposition comes in many different colors, particularly when some believers have a grievance or axe to grind, whether justified or not. Many Christians label other Christians with various epithets in order to dampen the influence of another. In the face of hostilities—mental or physical—one can still use the opportunity to win others to Jesus or to strengthen those already in Jesus (see [Philippians 2:12-18](#)).

How should one react to opposition? There is no “pat” answer to how one should respond in every situation. It all depends on the circumstances surrounding the unfriendliness. This message centers around three major Scriptures in order to try to see how Jesus and Paul dwelt with opposition in a positive manner—[John 11:1-19](#), [1 Corinthians 16:8-9](#); [2 Timothy 4:1-5](#). As one examines the story of Jesus’ resurrection powers upon Lazarus, one sees how Jesus, in the face of conflict, took advantage of the situation in order to lead others to faith in Him. In other words, antagonism, in this case, to Christ meant an open door to do the will of God.

As one seeks to understand what the written Revelation of God meant to the original hearers and readers, one also searches for a present day application to his or her own life. One can analyze the various Scriptures in which opposition occurs in order to try to make a determination as to how one should act under certain circumstances. For instance, there may be times when one must flee. Yet, at other times, one may utilize dispute as an open door to reach out to others. Again, it all depends on the circumstances.

This essay develops more of the positive reaction to opposition as an open door in order to reach out to the nonconforming rather than the negative—leaving or fleeing.

Are you willing to use resistance as an opportunity to reach out to those who do not know the Messiah? How one behaves toward someone else can also determine the influence one has in his/her own environment. Christians should never allow their conduct to infringe upon their testimony about the Gospel of Christ and its life changing qualities. Paul's words to the Philippians deals with outward circumstances and one's external behavior to opposition. He writes:

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him,³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have (**Philippians 1:27-30**).

Following this terse statement about one's conduct in the face of opposition, Paul immediately calls to the attention of the Christians at Philippi the mind of Christ by saying: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (**2:5**). How did Jesus deal with the individuals crucifying Him? Listen to the words of Jesus: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (**Luke 23:34**). Also, one should reflect upon Paul's incarceration as an example of how to use unwanted circumstances as a means to open the door to others for Christ. Paul's imprisonment in Rome is a classic case in point of how one ought to use confrontation as an occasion to win others to Jesus. How do you react toward unkind acts? How do you react toward someone that has done you wrong? One can talk a good case of Christianity, but when someone does you wrong, do you forget every Christian virtue in your relationship to that person. Does the opposition party detect ungodly anger in your voice? Do you use language that is not becoming for a believer? Or do you speak words that are seasoned with grace (**Colossians 4:6**)? One should remember the words of Jesus when one confronts struggle:

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor^a and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies^b and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (**Matthew 5:43-48**).

Today, all conflict within the body of Christ is not as a result of preaching the Gospel. Even though Paul experienced most of his disagreement through preaching the Gospel of God's grace, nevertheless, he still experienced skirmishes in other areas. For

example the clash between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark resulted in separate missionary activities ([Acts 15:36-41](#)). But if the battle results directly from one's stance concerning the truth of the Gospel (salvation by grace versus salvation by works—see [Galatians 3:1-14](#)), one should remember that he/she is a minister of Jesus Christ. In this role of priestly function, everyone is obligated to uphold the Gospel at all cost. One cannot compromise the Gospel ([1:4-9](#)).

If one suffers persecution, does this mean that one is not faithful to God? No! If Jesus suffered rejection, is it too much to believe that His disciples too will experience the same treatment from well-meaning individuals? Christians are not immune from difficulties in life from the world or from other sincere Christians. Listen to Jesus as he cautions His twelve apostles:

A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.²⁵ It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! ([Matthew 10:24-25](#)).^[1]

Christians frequently suffer from the actions of the members of their own local congregation as well as ostracism from members of other congregations—local or nationwide. Again, do you consider animosity from other Christians as an open door to teach them about the love of God? Often times, problems arise among members over small matters, not because of doctrinal disagreements, but personalities. In other words, the lack of love is the cause of much division. It is not uncommon for believers to leave a congregation for the slightest infraction—something said or done that they do not particularly like. It is then that these disgruntled members begin to look for flaws in someone else's behavior—though not necessarily unethical—in order to justify their not loving their brother or sister in Christ, in spite of John's warning: "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness" ([1 John 2:9](#)). This is not to say that every person who stops work with one congregation and starts work with another fellowship hates his brother or sister in the Lord. Sometimes, individuals feel that they can do more for Christ in another congregation.

Even though most Christians have read or heard someone call attention to the Sermon on the Mount, nevertheless, many fail to hear Christ's instructions concerning one's behavior toward one that he or she has offended. The reaction of many Christians is not reconciliation, but rather separation. The response is: I will just meet with another church. Thus, the issues of disharmony are never resolved. The sun continuously goes down upon their anger. If one cannot love his brother or sister whom he has seen, how can one love God whom he has not seen (see [1 John 4:19-21](#))? Listen to Jesus' reaction to a problem that separates one individual from another:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift ([5:23-24](#)).

Once more, do you consider opposition as an opportunity to witness for Christ?

How have you reacted to this instruction from the Lord? One can hardly read this admonition from Jesus without reflecting upon the words of Paul to the Ephesians: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (**Ephesians 4:3**). Yet again, Paul writes: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (**4:32**). Christians should try to work out their problems, not divide. This spirit of toleration is the general principle to be adhered to (**Ephesians 4:32, Romans 16:17**), but, in some circumstances, the persecution by certain Christians is so intimidating that one has no recourse but to leave, which, too, is a biblical stance. Paul too encountered such resentment that, in some circumstances, he frequently had to leave and go to individuals that were more perceptive to the truths of the Gospel of Christ (**Acts 18:5-8**). Nevertheless, he used aggression as an opportunity to reach more people for Jesus.

Sometimes Christians are so implacable that one cannot reason with them. Many religious leaders in Paul’s day were so cold-hearted that he had to begin his ministry with Gentiles who were more perceptive to the Gospel of Christ (**17:1-9**). When one encounters this kind of performance, one needs to learn how to conduct oneself when one receives resistance in his/her daily walk with God. Some disagreement is so unpleasant that believers have no choice but to leave the fellowship that he/she has been associated with for many years. This author (Dallas Burdette) stayed with the one-cup and Sunday school movement for seventeen years, but the hostilities became so great that leaving rather than staying could do more good for the cause of Christ. Jesus and the apostles all experienced this type of behavior from the religious leaders and the people. Frequently, leaders in control will not allow anyone to participate in the congregation who refuses to adhere to the traditions of the local congregation. They are castigated, they are ostracized, and they are vilified as rebels. Sometimes one has to leave in order to serve God more effectively in soul winning and for his/her own spiritual sanity. In the first commission, Jesus issues a warning about rejection:

Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave.¹² As you enter the home, give it your greeting.¹³ If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you.¹⁴ If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town (**Matthew 10:11-14**).

When one experiences battle from Christians as Jesus and the apostles received, one frequently has to go where he or she can do the most good for the cause of Christ (see **Acts 18:6**). One’s walk with God proceeds from its strong assurance that God is still in control; one is not guaranteed immunity from open aggressions and insidious hostilities and unfounded allegations about one’s motives from other believers. One of the remarkable things about Christianity is not that it believes in spite of the historical evidence, but rather it proceeds in spite of its opposition—“The gates of Hades will not overcome it” (**Matthew 16:18**). Having said this, one still needs to learn how to conduct himself/herself so that the interests of God’s kingdom are promoted. How one conducts oneself affects, not only oneself, but also the interest of Christ’s members. One can hardly ponder proper Christian conduct without thinking about Jesus’ prayer to the Father:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me (**John 17:20-21**).

There is a sense in which war should cease and desist within the body of Christ, especially over trivial things. It is in this same vein that Paul warns the Galatians: “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (**Galatians 5:15**). Christians should learn to “serve one another” (**5:13**). Why? Listen once again to Paul’s reasoning: “The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (**5:14**). But, on the other hand, if one undermines the Gospel of Christ, then one cannot compromise in this area (**2:5, 11-21**). Jesus is the exemplar for one’s reaction to turn opposition into an opportunity for witnessing about Christ. The story of Christ’s journey to Bethany is a classic example of how Jesus turned opposition into an opportunity to cause individuals to believe in Him.

Christ Journeys to Bethany

As mentioned earlier, this story about Jesus’ journey to Bethany is one that is well known (**John 11:1-16**). This story details how Jesus took advantage of an opportunity to glorify God, in spite of apposition. Hopefully, from this story, one can also make application to his/her own life in seeking to make the best of any opposition that may confront one. Even though the scenario is different for the believer today, nevertheless, one can still draw conclusions based upon the historical circumstances surrounding this encounter of Jesus with Martha and Mary and Lazarus. At an earlier time, Jesus had escaped the clutches of the Jews and traveled East of the Jordan, a place where John the Baptist had baptized in his ministry (**10:38-42**). While in this place, Jesus received word from Mary and Martha, sisters of Lazarus, that Lazarus was sick (**11:1-3**). Upon hearing the news, Jesus waited another two days before making the trip to Bethany (**11:6-7**). Before leaving, the disciples questioned the wisdom of Jesus in going back into the territory where the Jews had just a short time ago tried to stone Him (**11:8**). Whereupon, Jesus gave to the disciples one of the now most cited Scriptures within the Christian community:

Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world’s light.¹⁰ It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light (**11:9**).

Jesus did not refuse to go to Bethany in the face of opposition. Rather, He chose to go to this small town in order that His disciples might believe (**11:14**) and bring glory to God (**11:46**). On the surface, Jesus is simply telling His disciples that a man will not stumble in the day; yet, He too is saying that a man must finish his work while it is day. Even in the face of death, one must not back down. Jesus went to Bethany in order that He might call attention to Himself as the Resurrection and the Life (**11:25**). What looks like opposition from the Jews is still an opportunity to serve the will of God, which in this case brings about faith on the part of many (**11:45**). Jesus went to the tomb and requested that the stone be rolled away (**11:38-39**). Even though Lazarus had been dead for four days (**11:39**), He then told the two sisters that He had informed them earlier that if they believed they would see the glory of God (**11:40**). It is at this point that Jesus prays to the

Father:

Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me” (11:41-42).

Jesus is giving an illustration to His twelve disciples that what often appears as opposition is in reality an open door for service to the will of God. He is giving them an example that they too might follow in His steps when they, too, are faced with what appears to be insurmountable opposition. He wants them to learn how to look animosity in the face and survive. He wants them to look beyond the outward circumstances to the hand of God. It is in this vein that Paul encourages the Philippians, in spite of persecution, to remember that God was working in them (**Philippians 2:12-13**).

Paul Journey to Ephesus

Paul, while in Ephesus, wrote to the Corinthians about his work in Ephesus (**1 Corinthians 16:5-8**). In this Epistle, Paul encountered battle, but, in spite of resistance, he tells the saints at Corinth: “But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me” (**16:5-8**). Even though he met hostility from many, nevertheless, he still considered a door having been opened to him to preach Christ and Him crucified. Surely Paul was familiar with the words spoken by the Lord in a vision to Ananias: “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (**Acts 9:15-16**).^[2]

One must look beyond outward circumstances to the ultimate good that may come from one’s efforts to promote the kingdom of God. In other words, one must keep his/her eyes on heaven, not earthly comfort. Paul refused to allow the riot in Ephesus to deter him from proclaiming that there is only one God (**Acts 19:23-41**). Demetrius, a maker of silver shrines for the so-called god Artemis, created an uproar over the loss of revenue as a result of Paul’s preaching. Opposition was no new thing for Paul. He had experienced opposition on his first missionary journey that would have caused the average individual to throw in the towel, but not Paul. He refused to allow dissension to hinder his preaching God’s grace. He fought to make inroads into the kingdom of darkness in order that the light of the kingdom of God could advance. He did not seek safety and peace for his own protection, but rather he sought the peace that passes all understanding—peace with God.

All Christians want peace, but not peace at the expense of the Gospel of God. One cannot always sidestep opposition, even as Paul did not sidestep the issue of justification when Peter played the hypocrite (**Galatians 2:11-21**). When the Gospel is at stake, one must be willing to enter combat. Are you willing to give yourself wholeheartedly to the Gospel in spite of adversarial opponents—individuals who advance salvation by works rather than by faith alone? Christians must not quench the Holy Spirit in their standing up for salvation by grace. One should never allow anger from the opposing party to dampen one’s spiritual vigor or embitter one’s soul. One should always feel the way Paul expresses himself to the Galatians: “I have been crucified with Christ

and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” ([Galatians 2:20](#)).

Paul’s Admonition to Timothy

Paul writes words of encouragement to Timothy in order that Timothy might preach the Word in spite of opposition from opponents. He did not want this young preacher to allow confrontation to keep him from spreading the Gospel and right behavior. He writes:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry ([2 Timothy 4:1-5](#)).

Paul’s final words to Timothy are not a comforting message; it is a message about individuals who will not put up with healthy teaching ([4:3](#)). Many will turn from the word about Jesus and turn to myths ([4:4](#)). Yet, in spite of this warning, Timothy was told to “keep his head” and to do the “work of an evangelist” and to perform properly his “duties” of Christian ministry ([4:5](#)). All Christians should always bear in mind that God is still working in them in spite of persecution ([Philippians 2:12-13](#)). The place of Christian witness is often a difficult and an isolated ministry.

CONCLUSION

When one engages in Christian warfare, one is immediately confronted with the reality that Christian witness is hard and lonely. One may experience opposition from one’s own spouse or close relatives in his/her endeavors to promote Christianity or in his/her desire to serve the Lord. This author (Dallas Burdette) recently baptized a woman who received tremendous antagonism from her husband about her conversion to Christianity. Christians should look upon struggle as an open door of opportunity to witness for Christ. The question presented by Paul to the Romans sums up beautifully the mindset of resistance from outside sources that Christians can still find comfort in: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword” ([Romans 8:35](#))? Once more he says with gusto: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” ([8:37](#)).

^[1]All Scripture citations are from *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), unless stated otherwise.

^[2]*The Holy Bible : New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).